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The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

SPECIAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

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UNIVERSAL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS:

THE NEED AND THE VISION

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UNIVERSAL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS: THE NEED AND THE VISION

THE NEED

Economic Pressures on the Family

Unprecedented economic and demographic forces have dramatically changed the American family. Today, less than 10% of all families fit the "Ozzie and Harriet" stereotype of the breadwinning husband, the homemaking wife and two children. In today's two parent families, both parents must work to provide a decent standard of living. Despite the fact that the number of working mothers has increased more than 50% between 1973 and 1985, the real median income of two-parent families declined. These issues are compounded in the growing numbers of single-parent families, which are typically poorer than two-parent families.

* Nationwide, one-half of all married mothers with children under two work; this is an increase of 108% since 1970.

* By 1995, two-thirds of all preschool children and three-quarters of all school-age children will have working mothers.

* Three out of five Massachusetts children under thirteen live in families with two working parents or in single parent families with a working parent.

* A 1983 New York Times poll found that 71% of working mothers worked not for "pin money" or because a career was interesting, but to support their families.

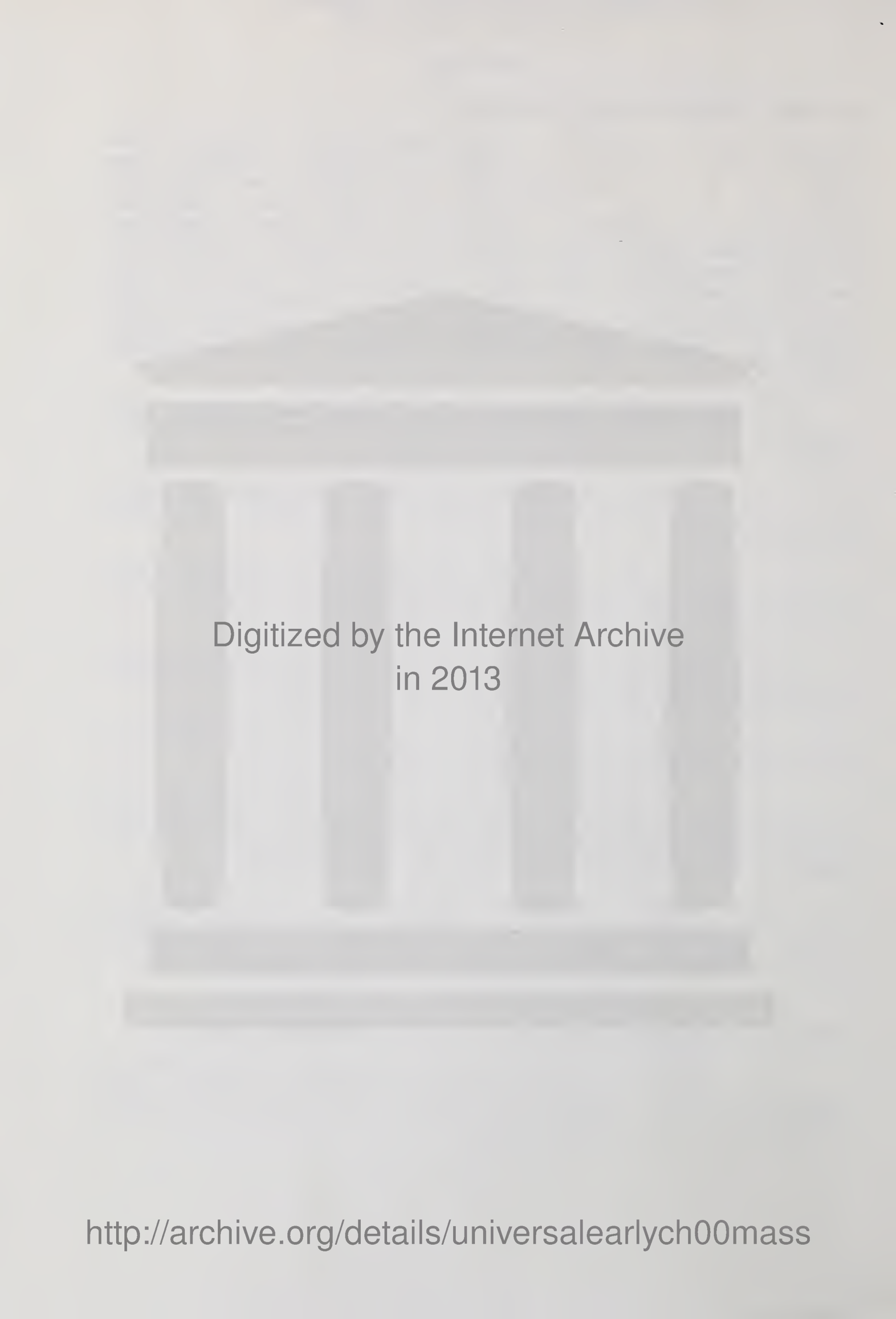
* Without the earnings of working wives, 35% more two-parent families would live in poverty.

* It is estimated that by 1990, nearly one in four children will live in a single-parent family, a 48% increase since 1980; projections indicate that one-half of these children under six will be under the poverty line.

For today's families, child care is the necessary link to economic survival. Without child care, parents cannot work to support their families. In particular, poor families need child care to raise themselves out of poverty.

Social and Economic Benefits of Early Childhood Programs

In addition to the powerful economic forces driving families' need for child care, numerous studies have demonstrated the long term social and economic benefits of high quality early childhood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High/Scope Education Research Foundation study of the Perry Preschool in Ysplanti, Michigan, found that:

* For every dollar spent on quality preschool, $4 to $7 were returned to society; this return came primarily in the form of reduced costs for special and remedial education and legal intervention with juvenile delinquents.

* Children enrolled in quality preschool were: far more likely to graduate from high school; one-half as likely to become pregnant as teenagers or become dependent on welfare; twice as likely to become literate, go on to higher education and have jobs; much less likely to become involved in crime.

An ongoing study at the University of North Caroline in Chaptel Hill is confirming the benefits to children of quality child care programs in terms of emotional development and succes in school

High quality early childhood programs form a bedrock for today's families. Not only do they enable parents to work and support their families, they lay the groundwork for childrens' future success. In so doing, they also promote the long-term economic competitiveness of our society.

Shortage of Early Childhood Programs

Depsite the tremendous economic need for and compelling social and economic benefits of early childhood programs, supply lags far behind demand. This shortage is compounded by the fact that the high costs of existing programs are unaffordable for most families. Many families face weekly dilemmas about whether to pay for child care or pay the bills.

* In Massachusetts, one-third of all families looking for child care can't find it' and another one-third can't find it at a price they can afford.

* The average cost of child care in Massachusetts is $5000 a year per child; it can cost $10,000 a year, on the average, for an infant in child care.

* Two parents working full time at minimum wage would have to spend 45% of their income to pay for two childrend in child care.

* A single mother with two children under six earning the median income for that group would have to pay 94% of her income for child care.

THE VISION

The United States and South Africa are the only industrialized nations without a national child care policy. Other countries provide significant support to early childhood programs.

* Sweden has nationalized child care provided through an extensive network of locally operated but state funded and regulated child care facilities. The state subsidizes the cost of care in these centers so families usually pay less than $750 a year for child care.

* Like Sweden, France has a widespread network of locally-run child care centers; local government subsidizes the cost of these centers, so parents can pay according to their income, and establishes strict guidelines to ensure the quality of care.

* The province of Ontario, Canada has declared that child care is a basic public service, not welfare, and has embarked on a three year plan to ensure that, by 1990, all famlies who want it have access to a range of affordable high quality early childhood programs.

Federal Initiatives

There is a great deal of activity in Congress to expand federal involvement in early childhood programs. Of the dozens of bills being considered in the current session, some of the most significant are:

* The "Act for Better Child Care", or the ABC Bill, sponsored by the Childrens' Defense Fund and over seventy organizations representing labor, educational organizations, women's groups, childrens' organizations, and religious groups. The ABC Bill would provide $2.5 billion in federal funds to states for programs to increase the availability, affordability and quality of child care services.

* The "Smart Start" program developed by Sen. Kennedy to make early childhood programs available to every four year old in the country. "Smart Start" would emphasize the development of high quality educational programs which meet the needs of working parents.

Sen. Dodd has file legislation, co-authored by Dr. Edward Zigler of the Bush Center at Yale, providing $120 million a year, for three year, to finance demonstration projects in 60 schools. These projects would provide on-site quality child care for 3-12 year olds before and after regular school hours and for the full day during school vacations.

Mandate of Early Childhood Commission

Massachusetts leads the country in implementing creative state initiatives to expand the supply, affordability and quality of early childhood programs. The Commission on Early Childhood Programs intends to build upon this history and develop a plan which could serve as a national model to provide universally available, affordable, high quality early childhood programs. These programs should be available for a full day, year round and should have developmentally appropriate curricula.